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The Anxiety of 'Read It Later'

By Nathan Holic
UCF Forum columnist
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As a kid, I loved horror movies, and so one year I set out to record every horror movie ever made. My parents had purchased a box of blank VHS tapes from Sam's Club, and I used Super Long Play to record three movies to a single tape. (The quality was terrible, but this was the 1980s: The TVs were terrible, too.)

Now, in the age of Netflix and 10,000 cable TV channels, this project sounds unrealistic, but as a preteen my world was limited: I had access only to the horror aisle at Blockbuster; to USA's "Up All Night" and the HBO "Free Preview Weekend;" and to Camelot Music and Suncoast Motion Picture Company (and whatever other mall-based entertainment stores that are now out of business). There was a horizon that I could see, maybe even reach.

Similarly, my friend Laurie recently told me about how she developed her love of reading. As a kid, she'd go to her small-town library each week and check out a few books; eventually, she decided to read every work of fiction in the library. She started with "A," and she barreled through books, giving everything at least 30 pages to hook her. She never accomplished her goal, only made it to "G," but damn: She made it to "G"! Maybe, like my horror movie project, this goal was impossible — but at least there was a sense that it could be accomplished.

These memories are silly, yes, and frivolous, but lately I've been thinking about them more and more. I miss the days before my reading and viewing lists became

overwhelming and anxiety-inducing. I miss the feeling that I could actually consume the content I wanted to consume.

Back in the mid-2000s, I was a subscriber to *Esquire* and *National Geographic*, and my wife to *Vanity Fair* and *Women's Health*. There wasn't yet an expectation that all publications offer all their content online, for free, all the time. And anyway, I loved print magazines and journals, how the changing monthly covers would change the look and feel of our coffee table, and by extension our entire living room. I loved — still love — the sort of “reading goal” that a monthly magazine suggests, a finite number of articles, some which you dog-ear for immediate reading, others which become secondary priorities, backups if all else fails you... I love the sense of completion that a magazine represents.

But then somewhere along the line, I got a decent computer and a decent Internet connection, and I downloaded an application to sync my bookmarks across multiple PCs, and then I was creating folders for bookmarked web pages and magazines and articles. My folders started small — a handful of stories — but month by month they grew: links emailed to me by students, colleagues, friends, more than I was able to read; *Esquire* and *National Geographic* and *Sports Illustrated* at some point uploaded a century's worth of archives, and so I was swimming in bookmarked articles, essays, feature stories, fiction, memoir, infographics; I found *The Best American Magazine Writing* on Amazon and read the table of contents, Google-searched the titles and authors, found the stories online, bookmarked them for later reading.

I canceled my print subscriptions, created more “Read It Later” folders.

And then came the Facebook newsfeed, new stories and articles and comics and videos posted by friends every 60 seconds. So many more things to read later. So much more content to consume.

Click a link, open a new tab. Then another. I now have so many bookmark folders that, if I want to read something, I have to leave it open in a browser tab or I might never find it again. And then came my iPhone, with its own web browser, its own long line of open tabs, things that caught my eye and evoked a “click” but not yet a “read,” things that I still want to consume... someday.

And all of this, of course, raises an important question: Will I ever actually read or watch any of this stuff? When is “later” going to occur?

I’ve got a couple of friends who say that this is the key to immortality. Far from feeling anxious, they are emboldened by the hundreds of books on their Amazon wish lists, the thousands of movies on their Netflix queues, their full DVRs and watch-listed on-demand programming. They feel certain that they can never die so long as they’ve still got so many books left on their “reading lists,” so many movies left on their “viewing lists.” The moment that these lists are completed, they will have accomplished all that they set out to do, and fine, life is then allowed to end.

I’ve always liked this way of thinking, this emphasis on fun tasks that give shape and purpose to your future, compiling lists of books that you want to read so that you don’t forget any of them, building your Netflix Instant Queue so that (against all odds) you’ll always have the perfect movie for every moment, and so that — through the combined power of all those documentaries you added — you might someday know *all there is to know*.

But these days, the name of the game for any publisher or service — whether it’s a movie rental business, or an online publisher of Ed Wood fan fiction — is content. The more content, the better. More articles, more video, more recipes, more listicles. It’s as if every online “content provider” wants the world to perceive it as a dizzyingly tall staircase we’ll never be able to fully ascend.

There was a time when content was alluring to me, when it felt awesome to have access to 10,000 horror movies (available at the click of a button!). But now: the vastness — it's so big that my time spent searching and list-building likely matches my time spent consuming, so big that the horizon has disappeared.

This is not something that a reasonable man should be stressed about.

These days I too often respond to the black infinity of my options by freaking out — by turning off Netflix rather than watching any movie at all, by shutting my iPad rather than making a choice between the 15 different open tabs.

Maybe this is a personal problem, something that only I struggle with.

Or maybe you're working through the same anxiety, a dozen tabs on your monitor and a full DVR at home.

Maybe I — maybe we all — need to re-evaluate how much content we want or intend to consume. Right now I seem to derive too much pleasure from simply crossing movies off the queue, clearing space from my DVR, emptying "Read It Later" folders and closing tabs, as if completion is the goal, rather than the *experience* of the book or article or film. If I'm going to ease this anxiety, I need to figure out how to approach these experiences in a different way than I approach my grocery list.

Maybe it's as simple as telling myself that there is *no way to consume everything, no way to consume everything, no way to consume everything...*

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